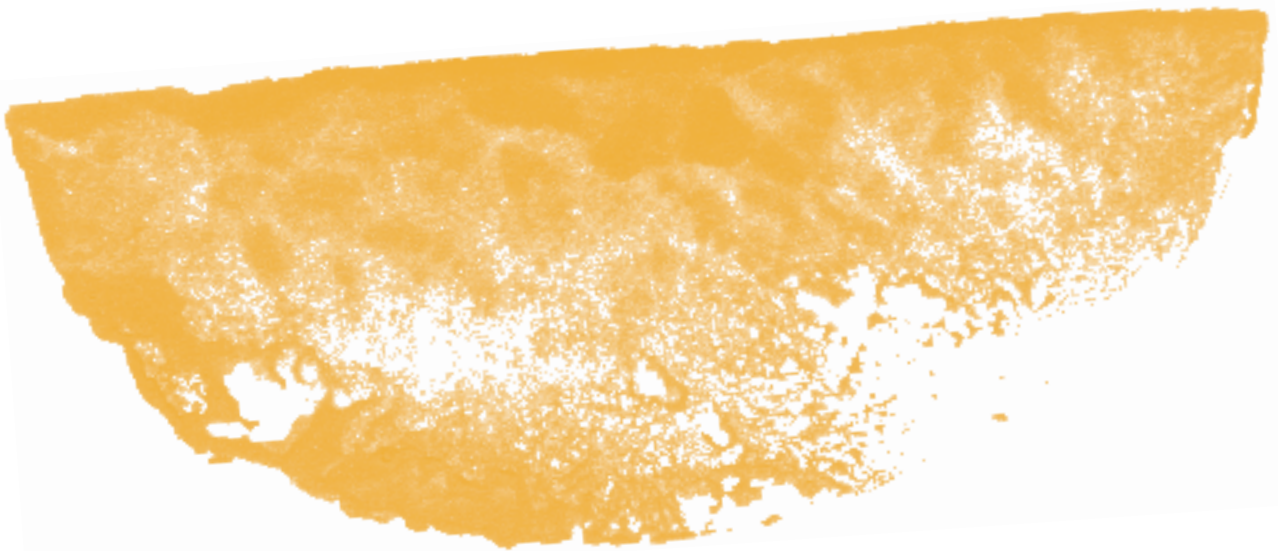


Curdled

Corinna Keupp



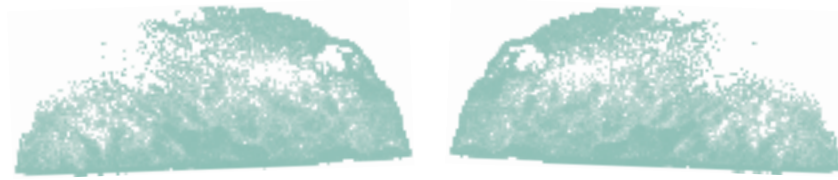
Writing Matters

How people eat their yoghurt tells you a lot about them. Imagine you have one of these yoghurts that have two parts, like some extra cereal bits or fruit mash. There are some people who only put in a little bit at a time on the top, then they eat that and then put on more. Then there are the people who put everything in at once, and then dig down and have both layers on their spoon. But then there are the worst people, the ones who put everything in at once and then mix it together, which begs the question, why not buy already mixed yoghurt to begin with? Obviously, there are also people, like Sofi, who simply don't like yoghurt – she doesn't like the weird consistency. And there might even be people who first eat one container and then the other, but let's not think about these kinds of heathens right now. At least Tobias didn't do that, but he was of the kind who mixes the fruit in with the yoghurt, yet he insists on only eating these kinds of yoghurts. The one time Sofi brought simple strawberry yoghurts, he first ignored them and then threw a tantrum after Sofi asked him to eat them. They ended up in the trash, and Sofi ended that night crying in the bath. Something else also ended that night a year ago. Tobias just didn't know that quite yet. He was about to find out though.

The alarm went off. It was precisely 7 o'clock in the morning. It was going to be a rainy day in the capital. Sofi had been lying awake for hours. She turned away from the newly awoken Tobias. She could still watch him through the mirror across their bed. How he went into the en-suit, showered, got ready, and then left the light on again – like every morning.

“Sofi, come get up. I want company. You know I have that import-





ant meeting today.”

Reluctantly she swung out of bed, grabbed her bathrobe, and went to sit at the kitchen table. Tobias sat across from her, wearing a dark grey suit – the tie still missing. In front of him, freshly made orange juice. His breakfast consisted of that hip, healthy diet. His jawline was sharp, and he had that three-day beard going, which made Sofi fall in love with him. He was reading the newspaper. “Corrupt Mayor Miller found guilty.”

He had a devious smirk on his face; because of Miller’s misconduct things fell into motion, making his interview today possible, and a promotion was on the horizon too.


“People really should think about the consequences of their actions,” Tobias said, slightly shaking his head.

“Well, it worked out for you, didn’t it?”

He glanced over his glasses, slightly moving the paper out of the way.

“Sure, it did, but it would have looked better for the company to get the contract legitimately.”

“Since when do you care about morals?” Sofi quickly picked up the teacup in front of her, so she didn’t have to look at him. The green tea was from last night and therefore long cold. She shouldn’t have said that. Tobias put the newspaper down, pointing a finger at her.



“I don’t like your tone, missy.” And off he went, how he saved her from the street, how without him she would only be a failed artist who used to beg for food and sleep on a park bench by Main Street. With every sentence his rage grew, and his head turned redder.

Sofi didn’t say anything. She let him babble, looked him in his enraged eyes, and tried to look apologetic. Thankfully his phone rang.

He took a deep breath.

“A wonderful good morning Matt.”

Fascinating, how quickly his tone changed. He got up and went into the bedroom to talk business.

Time for Sofi to clean the table and actually make breakfast for herself. The first time he gave her that “speech” she couldn’t eat for days and was scared for weeks that he would throw her out of the apartment. Back then she still loved him and what he could provide for her. A safe home, a partner in crime, a hopeful future. Today it was different, it was normal for him to scream at her. Still, she didn’t have a real appetite. Some simple toast with butter on it should be enough. Sofi could hear Tobias laugh in the room next door. She switched on the radio on the surround sound system. She’d miss the good quality of the music. It was a small price to pay for her freedom though. She went over her plan again. She had washed her favorite clothes. They hadn’t been put away yet but that was on purpose, so they were more quickly accessible. She

had lent her favorite books to Julia, her closest friend. Sofi didn't really have a lot of those, and she wasn't sure she could categorize her coworker as a best friend, but she was all that she had and she was great at making every situation seem better.

Sofi knew where all of her most precious belongings were. Getting the code for the safe, which held her passport, had been the hardest part of it all. Actually leaving should be a piece of cake, right?

Tobias returned, smiling to himself. Sofi could feel her shoulders relax. She hadn't noticed that she had tensed up.

"Mr. Anderson will be here to pick me up in 15 minutes, then I'll meet Matt in the office. At 11 we will meet with the city council and present our corruption-free construction plan. I am sure we will go grab some beers afterwards."

Sofi was very glad she wouldn't have to experience a drunk Tobias. He was unpredictable when intoxicated. Once he proposed to her – thankfully he didn't remember that the next morning – another time she had to cover up her black eye for weeks. She was a pro at that.

"Sofi, hello!?" He snapped his fingers in her face. "When I get home you will make some steaks for me then?"

"Sure, whatever you want." She tried to smile but her mask was cracking. He looked her up and down.

"Maybe you could actually dress up nicely for once too. It is a big



day for me after all.” Sofi really tried to hide her disgust and that her breakfast was coming back up again.

“You really should get your hair fixed up too. What do you call it... touch the roots?”

“I’ll call the hairdresser today.” Sofi really wanted to get her hair done but instead of bleaching and destroying her hair, her plan was to get it dyed dark brown. She wanted to go back to her natural colour.

Tobias seemed satisfied with her answers today. He downed his orange juice, gave Sofi a kiss on her forehead, and then left the kitchen. In about seven minutes – approximately two songs on the radio, he would leave their apartment, take the elevator down, and be greeted outside the building by his driver, Mr. Anderson. On some days Sofi would look through the window above her couch to see the black Mercedes drive off. Not today. Today she was busy.

First, she opened the safe, the code was his mother’s birthday, the only birthday he could remember. Next to important papers were some expensive watches. Sofi was tempted to take them, selling them could make her new start easier, but they would also be able to be traced back. So, they stayed where she found them. There were two suitcases in their flat – for Tobias’ business trips – one small one for weekend trips and one bigger one for more days.

Sofi told Julia to bring some cartons because she wanted to reorganize and donate some old DVDs and books. That had been a lie – a believable lie (who even watches DVDs nowadays) – a lie that





wouldn't hurt her if Tobias found out about it. It was her belongings. Things she actually had paid for. How foolish of her to have spent that little money she had earned as a substitute art teacher on fleeting possessions. She hadn't bought any entertainment things all throughout last year and the saved-up money should get her a head start.

She didn't have a bank account thanks to Tobias. At first – coming from the streets – she didn't trust the banks. Money only was good when it was accessible. Later, Tobias did not see a reason for her to have one. All her money was hidden behind her tampons, the only place he didn't dare to look.

The door rang.

Julia had come, she held three folded moving cartons under her arm. Julia had long wavy blond hair, her fashion style was a bit stuck in the 70s with bootcut jeans and a flower blouse with a beige cardigan over it.

Sofi invited her in and then was searching for words to explain everything, but instead she just burst into tears.

“Sweetie, are you alright?”

Sofi was crying. The snot was running down her nose.

“Sssh... everything will be okay. Breathe.”

Julia held her tight while Sofi soaked her sweater in tears.

Stupid how she was wasting time like this. She blinked, trying to clear her eyes.

“Did you and Tobias fight?” Sofi shook her head and felt a headache coming. She tried to concentrate on breathing.

Quietly she whispered: “You have to help me...” Another wall of sobbing broke out of her. It seemed as if her carefully built wall that had prevented her from ever speaking about this came crashing down.

Julia put the cartons down, took Sofi’s hand and led her to the couch. She magically made some tissues appear out of her bag and gave Sofi a glass of water.

Her head was pounding at this point. The pain reminded her about the last time she felt similarly, it was when Tobias got angry. Sofi opened with shaking hands her robe and turned her shoulder towards Julia. According to her pain, there should be a big enough bruise to make her understand. Sofi closes her eyes, trying to regulate her breathing. Julia’s cold hands touched her back.

“That looks horrible, dear. What happened?”

“He shoved me and I must have hit the table corner.” Sofi was surprised how nonchalantly and truthfully she answered. Julia’s eyes widened in surprise, and she put her hand over her mouth in shock.





Under her tears Sofi smiled, the truth was liberating. She wiped her tears over her burning face.

“Can you help me get away?” Now she could see tears building up in Julia’s eyes.

“Of course, of course... I am so sorry.” She grabbed her hands again. “Everything will be fine.”

Sofi slowly stood up and the two women began packing everything that would fit in three moving boxes and the two suitcases. It wasn’t a lot but more than starting at point zero.

At 10:50 her phone went off. She had set herself an alarm. “I should text him, wish him luck on his stupid project.”

“Why would you do that?” Julia wrinkled her forehead in disbelief.

“I don’t want him to be suspicious. I don’t wanna know what would happen if...” The rest of the sentence hung in the air.

Sofi sent him a quick: “Good luck” No smiley.

Weirdly enough he neither read nor replied to it.

The women had packed everything they could. Sofi had put on layers and layers of clothes, so she could take more with her. They took a taxi to Julia’s flat to leave the moving cartons there. She was going to send them to Sofi after she had found a place and many



months had passed. That was the plan at least. Not part of the plan was that Julia accompanied her to King's Cross.

The less Julia knows the better, but Sofi was really glad she was there with her. When they left the Piccadilly line Sofi noticed her phone blowing up.

5 Missed calls.

10 Text messages.

She didn't want to look and stuffed it back in her bag with shaking hands.

Julia had suggested – or rather forced – Sofi to get some food since she had seen how little she had eaten. Julia bought a meal deal at the small Sainsbury in the station. An “on the go, smoked ham and Cheddar” sandwich, a yoghurt as a snack, and water as a drink. No coffee, she was already nervous enough as it is.

Her phone was constantly ringing at this point. When she went to switch it to mute, she noticed that it was Matt calling, not Tobias.

Weird, but maybe just a coincidence. His phone could be broken. Little noises in her head started discussing. He couldn't possibly know yet, but what if he does?

She would have to change her number, but that was expected. Get rid of any connection, at least for a while. Sofi nibbled on her sandwich. The train was leaving in 45 minutes.

Julia messed up and picked up her phone without looking. It was an extraordinary situation for her. Her eyes went big when she recognized the voice calling her.

Sofi's fight or flight instinct kicked in; her adrenaline started pumping. She could take the next train, just get moving, out of the city. Her breath got faster, and her ears started ringing. She couldn't hear her surroundings anymore, and her pulse was echoing in her ears. The world started turning around her until finally Julia was able to break through.

"He's dead." Sofi's heart stopped. She couldn't make sense of what she just heard.

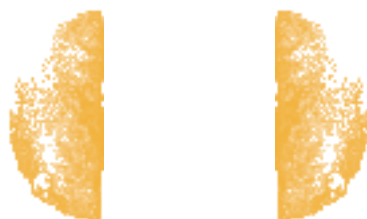
What?

"Sofi, listen. He's dead. There was an accident when they were driving to city hall."

No no no no no no.

It was a trick, it must be. There is no way that would happen on the day she was leaving. And even if there was an accident, how could they determine he was dead already? No, there was no way. Maybe the car was scratched, or Tobias was in the hospital. But then he wouldn't know she was leaving. It didn't make sense. It couldn't be. Her thoughts caught in a circle of couldn't, shouldn't, and what ifs.

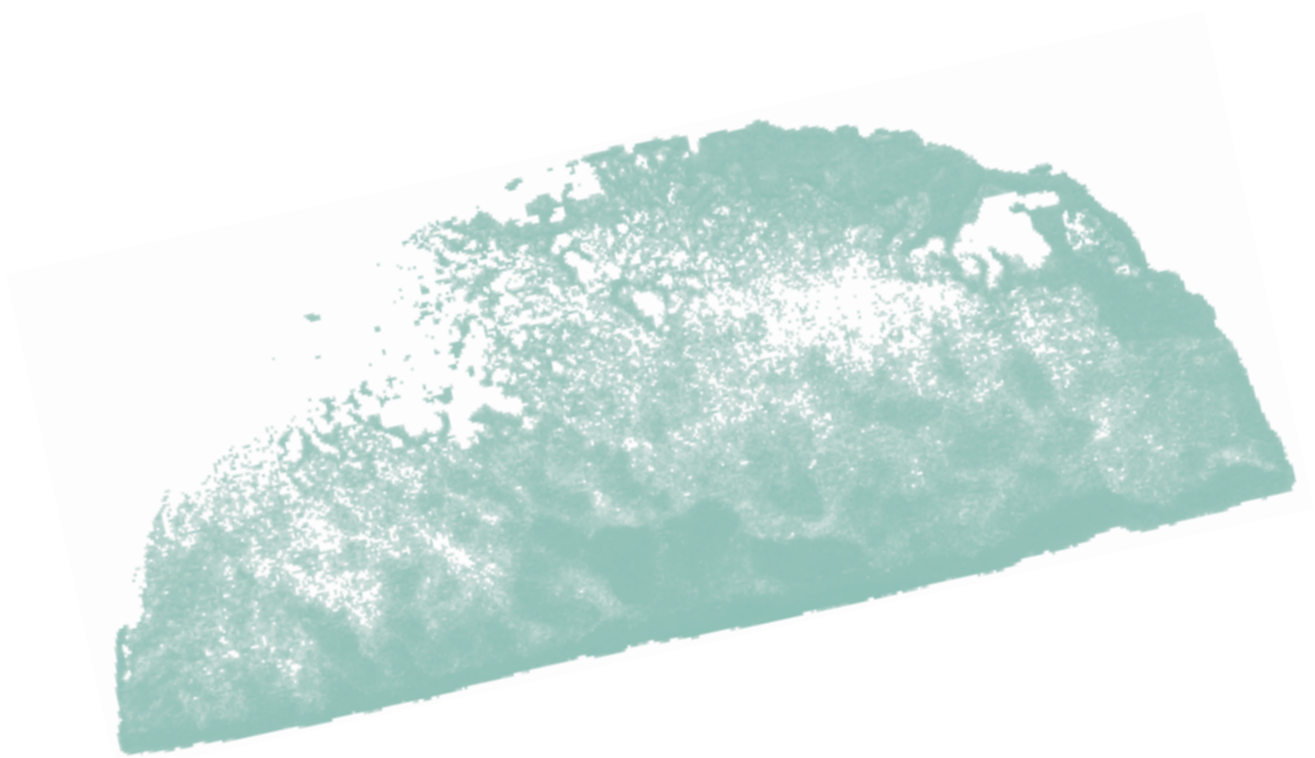
"Sofi, breathe. It's alright. Breath."



Sofi breathed in.

“You can go home now. You can take his things. You can be free.”

The yoghurt hit the floor and exploded. She didn't want to eat it anyway.



WRITING MATTERS

Workshop Led by Jan Carson
Coordinated by Dr. Petra Zaus & Antonios Smyrnaio

The mission of the Writing Matters initiative is twofold: exploring “matters” pertaining to writing practices and underscoring that writing “matters” as a powerful means of engaging with the world.

During the 2021 summer semester, the award-winning author Jan Carson convened a Writing Matters workshop for students at the JMU Würzburg. Carson emphasized developing structure, characterization, and narratology, but also community. When writing together, Carson observed, you find “a whole community of other people who see the world a little bit the same as you and suddenly it doesn’t feel as lonely anymore.” The short stories that emerged in this workshop are published here as chapbooks in the first of an ongoing series of publications that feature student work from the Writing Matters workshop series.

The workshop was made possible through the support of the American Studies department at the University of Würzburg, Irish Studies Würzburg (ISWÜ), and WueGlobal - Writing, Learning, Digital Connection, funded by the International Virtual Academic Collaboration Program (IVAC) / Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) / Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF).

